



Board of Forestry & Fire Protection -
Department of Forestry & Fire Protection
Public Scoping Hearing No. 1:
Draft Permanent SRA Fee Regulation



STAFF SUMMARY OF ORAL TESTIMONY

Meeting Date and Location: May 16, 2012, San Diego County Board of Supervisors Chambers, 1600 Pacific Highway, Room 310, San Diego, California.

Board Members and Staff Present: Member and RPC Chairman, Bruce Saito; Executive Officer, George Gentry; Deputy Director, Communications, Janet Upton; MVU Pre-Fire Engineer/Public Information Officer, Daryll Pina; MVU Unit Forester, Kathleen Edwards; FRAP Research Program Specialist, Justin Johnson; Regulations Coordinator, Eric Huff.

Speakers: Diane Jacob, San Diego County Supervisor (District 2); Richard Forster, Amador County Supervisor (District 2), Board Member-Regional Council of Rural Counties; Chief Tony Michel, Rancho Santa Fe Fire Protection District (FPD); Steve Kramer, President-Alpine FPD; Jean Slaughter, retired Chief and former Board Member-Deer Springs FPD; Neville Connell, President-Greater Alpine Fire Safe Council; Betty Frizzell, Lakeside resident; George Landt, Alpine resident; Donna Tisdale, Boulevard resident, Chair-Boulevard Planning Group, President-Backcountry Against Dumps, Secretary-Protect Our Communities Foundation; Weaver Simonson, President-Valley Center FPD; Lesley Barling, El Cajon resident; Jack Shelver, President-Julian/Cuyamaca FPD; Steve Butler, retired CDF firefighter, Ramona resident; Gary Fisher, Chief-City of Vista Fire Department/Vista FPD; John Adkins, retired CDF firefighter.

Summary of Comments:

- San Diego County should be exempted entirely from SRA Fee.
- SRA Fee is not a "fee," it is a "tax." It should have been voted on as a tax.
- ABX1 29's claim of "disproportionate fire protection benefit" to rural residents does not apply in San Diego County for the following reasons:
 - County has integrated fire protection system in which County Fire Authority Chief is same person as Cal Fire Unit Chief;
 - County commits \$15.5 million annually to augment rural fire protection of which \$10.2 million goes to Cal Fire for SRA protection;
 - \$15.5 million annually keeps 50 fire stations open year-round;

- County residents already pay a county-wide assessment plus local FPD assessment up to \$400 annually in some instances - added SRA Fee is in effect “triple taxation” with no additional benefit;
- County’s record of fire protection and prevention is exemplary and includes \$230 million spent on rural fire protection since 2003, purchase of new fire protection equipment including 2 helicopters and upgraded emergency radio network;
- San Diego County has made rural fire safety its chief priority over the past decade.
- San Diego County has and will continue to pay a fair and equitable amount to the State for fire protection; the SRA Fee is not fair or equitable.
- A very narrow segment of the population in San Diego County, including many who endured the 2003 and 2007 wildfires is required to bear a triple financial burden because the State Legislature chose not to adequately fund fire protection.
- ABX1 29 should be repealed or replaced by new legislation that will assess a fee to be paid by all Californians and not just rural landowners. Fire affects all residents of the State.
- The SRA Fee weakens the mutual aid system for fire protection. Rural fire districts will not be as inclined to provide assistance to State fire protection in the future if the SRA Fee assessment continues forward.
- According to Department of Finance information presented to the Board in March, grant funding will not be allocated to any local grant program until at least 2017. **[Staff Note: the speaker was referring to Cal Fire’s report to the Resource Protection Committee at the March 2012 Board Meeting].** However, the only “return to source” provision in the regulation is the grant funding program. This means that there is no additional possible benefit to local entities until at least 2017.
- SRA Fee is “quadruple taxation” for fire protection in Amador County: County taxpayers already pay taxes to State’s General Fund which in turn funds State Fire Protection; County voters approved “Measure M” to fund County fire protection; some local residents pay additional assessment to local fire protection districts.
- Cost of wildfire suppression in heavily populated urban areas is much higher than that of SRA areas.

- Rural landowners are being forced pay disproportionately for wildfire protection even though wildfires impact all residents of the State.
- Rancho Santa Fe Fire Protection District has an aggressive fire prevention program. The SRA Fee will provide no additional direct benefit to those who must pay it. Grant program funding appears to be far off. A fee that is supposed to go to fire prevention efforts should not be used for fire suppression funding.
- The grant program within the SRA Fee incentivizes development of innovative fire prevention solutions by local FPDs and FSCs to local fire protection problems. But, the State should not be collecting the fee and dispersing the grant funds back to the locals.
- The grant program part of the regulation does not identify what percentage of the collected fees will be returned to local entities. There should be a fixed percentage, or base minimum percentage, or dollar amount specified in the regulation.
- The regulation should specify the fire prevention activities to be funded by the SRA Fee.
- Citizens get 30 days to request an exemption, but the State gets 60 days to respond to the exemption request. Citizens should get at least the same amount of time as the State.
- The fee exemption should be no less than \$75 for those paying into local fire protection districts. Other exemptions should be available based upon the local fire protection district's ISO rating or the amount of money dedicated by the local district to fire prevention efforts.
- I pay \$400.24 annually to my local fire protection district, which includes funding of a fire prevention officer. They and our local fire safe council do a marvelous job and we don't need the State's help. Why do we need the additional SRA Fee? There are 457 units in my senior mobile home park. At \$150, the retired residents in my park would be paying a combined \$68,550.00 annually in SRA Fees and we won't get any additional fire prevention service for it.
- The SRA Fee legislation and regulation do not specifically target improvement in fire prevention or protection in SRA. Why is the grant funding not going to come until 2017?
- The SRA Fee unfairly targets rural east San Diego County residents even though fires in the County also affect residents outside of the SRA. Fire threatens everyone in San Diego County.

- The recent big fires in San Diego destroyed homes in the city and even homes within 400 yards of the coast were recently threatened by fires. There are many more, higher value homes in the urban areas of San Diego County and the cost for fire suppression would be much higher in those areas.
- The Board must find a way to have the burden for SRA fire protection shared by all the residents of San Diego County that could benefit from the SRA Fee.
- Local fire protection districts do provide SRA fire protection through the mutual aid system.
- Local fire safe council has an approved Community Wildfire Protection Plan and has completed fire prevention projects to protect 784 homes.
- San Diego Gas and Electric Company and hunters have been responsible for all of our major fires in San Diego County. I would support the SRA Fee if it would be spent to force SDG&E to protect ratepayers like their shareholders. I would support the SRA Fee if it forced DFG to stop issuing hunting licenses during high fire season.
- We've been doing controlled and pile burning on our property for the past sixty-seventy years and never had a problem with escapes. Now I have to get a permit from Cal Fire, the Air Pollution Control District, and the Environmental Protection Agency to burn. There have been plenty of good burn days that we weren't allowed to burn because of regulation. The Board should do something about this problem rather than assessing this fee.
- Cal Fire should get down to the community level with their fire prevention. It would be helpful if Cal Fire would be more accessible to rural landowners to assist with controlled burns.
- Power utilities have greatest impact on fire hazard levels. State policy is promoting the creation of an industrial power generation zone in rural San Diego County. The State is demanding this SRA Fee from rural property owners while simultaneously promoting a much bigger problem in the form of increased fire hazard associated with utility development.
- The \$35 fee exemption should be subject to annual adjustment for inflation just like the fee.
- Santa Ana wind conditions affect all residents of San Diego County, not just those in SRA. The fee should apply statewide, not just to those in SRA. Public safety is a responsibility of every citizen in the state.

- I pay \$100 annually to my local fire protection district and it is money well spent. I see very little possibility of a specific benefit from the SRA Fee. There might be some benefit in five years when grant funding might happen, but who knows if that will actually happen.
- San Diego County already has all of the possible fire prevention elements in place and the SRA Fee will provide nothing additional. San Diego County has fire prevention ordinances that require new construction to be hardened against ember intrusion and defensible space that exceed state standards. Every community has a local fire safe council with a Community Wildfire Protection Plan that funds local prevention efforts. If there is to be a fee for fire prevention, that money should be spent to support local work.
- This SRA Fee is a frustrating budget shell game and not intended to actually improve fire prevention in the State.
- The Vista Fire Protection District and City of Vista have a very effective fire prevention program that utilizes homeowner outreach, has created access roads for fire suppression efforts, and employed inmates for brush-clearing. This work has been done under the direction of the District Board for the benefit of local taxpayers.
- If you want to have effective fire prevention, you need to take the SRA Fees generated and return it all to the local jurisdictions because the locals know where best to allocate the resources to get the work done. Otherwise, there will be no real fire prevention benefit from the fees collected.
- The SRA Fee will fail in litigation. The Board should therefore redirect its efforts to conflagration damage reduction. The State needs more controlled burning, particularly in the interface areas.
- Cal Fire operates an inmate program that is probably one of the best in the nation. Inmate crews are an underutilized resource that could be effective in doing more brush clearing and controlled burning work, particularly in the interface areas. Fuel reduction in the interface areas is the key and where Cal Fire should redouble its efforts.
- The McCain Valley Conservation Camp is near many of the proposed new utility developments in eastern San Diego County and is critical to the community of Boulevard. Please keep this camp open.

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